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ABSTRACT

One major unit of the National Institute of Education (NIE), the Dissemination and Resources Group, is specifically charged with the responsibility of facilitating dissemination and use of the entire corps of knowledge about education: the outcomes of research and development supported not only by NIE but by other organizations and agencies as well, and information about promising and effective programs and practices in the real world of the school building and the classroom. The Dissemination and Resources Group is obligated to provide educators information about the full range of alternative solutions to their problems, rather than advocating one solution above others, and is committed to working through existing educational agencies and institutions whenever possible. The strategy of the group has three elements: first, maintaining and improving access to the complete knowledge base about education (primarily through operation of the Educational Resources Information Center--ERIC); second, building capacity for dissemination and utilization of knowledge throughout the education community (primarily through support of state departments of education); and third, supporting research, development, and evaluation needed to facilitate achievement of the other two missions. (Author/IRT)

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SPEAKER: Thomas D. Clemens, Chief, Division of Information and Communication Systems, National Institute of Education, Washington, DC

TOPIC: The Dissemination and Utilization of Research and Development in Education - Two Strategies

PLACE: Solarium, Shelburne Hotel

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PROGRAM: Page 49

Summary of Remarks

The National Institute of Education was established by the Education Amendments of 1972. Among other charges to the new agency was the most explicit and broadest mandate for dissemination of information ever included in a piece of Federal legislation dealing with education. It is clear that Congress expected the Institute not only to 'pass the word' about the results of our own research and development, but to assure that educators had access to the full range of knowledge about education, and to foster the use of that knowledge for improvement of educational practice.

In response, every part of the Institute engages in dissemination activities of some sort. In most organizational units, dissemination is limited to communication about the outcomes of programs and projects which they support. However, one major unit, the Dissemination and Resources Group, is specifically charged with the responsibility of facilitiating dissemination and use of the entire corpus of knowledge about education: the outcomes of research and development supported not only by NIE, but by other organizations and agencies as well, and information about promising and effective programs and practices in the real world of the school building and the classroom. Two principles underlie all our activities in the Dissemination and Resources Group. First, we believe that we have an obligation to provide educators information about the full range of alternative solutions to their problems, rather than advocating one solution above others. Second, we are committed to working through existing educational agencies and institutions whenever possible, instead of creating new institutions and instrumentalities.

The Dissemination and Resources program is comprised of two different but complementary strategies which are the subject of our session today. I shall describe one of these to you and Larry Hutchins will discuss the other. The strategy followed by the Information and Communication Systems Division is best characterized by the words, comprehensive and responsive. Put as briefly as possible, the intent of this strategy is to assure that every teacher, administrator, school board member, or other individual concerned with educational improvement has rapid and effective access to the full range of knowledge which can be of assistance in resolving any problem confronting him or her. This strategy grows out of the assumption that American education is and will continue to be extremely pluralistic, and that NIE has an obligation to assist the educational community to acquire and use knowledge responsive to the diverse range of problems confronting it. The comprehensiveness of the strategy, therefore, refers to the need for providing access to the widest possible range of knowledge about education; and its responsiveness emphasizes the need to deal with any problem confronting any educator, rather than some limited range of issues identified by Federal employees or others.

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This strategy consists of three elements: first, maintaining and improving access to the complete knowledge base about education; second, building capacity for dissemination and utilization of knowledge throughout the educational community; and third, supporting research, development, and evaluation needed to facilitate achievement of the other two missions. Let me describe our current efforts and plans in each of these three areas. Research and development plans will be discussed in conjunction with our efforts at providing knowledge access and building dissemination and utilization capacity, rather than as a separate issue.

Maintaining and Improving Access to Educational Knowledge

At the present time, our major effort in this direction is the operation of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). Over the past decade, ERIC has grown to be the largest screened knowledge base about education in the world. It is also one of the most widely used formal information systems in any discipline. At present, ERIC includes citations to over 200,000 technical reports, articles, speeches, and other documents. Over 16 million ERIC microfiche are purchased each year, most of them by over 600 institutions and organizations which maintain complete collections of the ERIC file.

But despite the extensive use of ERIC, we believe that it is essential that a wider range of knowledge resources about education be made available, and that the expanded knowledge base be made more accessible and easier to use for the educational community. For that reason, we are setting out on a program of five years or more to improve ERIC and, if necessary, develop new information systems addressing any needs which may be beyond the capacity of ERIC. During this period of time, we shall continue to maintain ERIC, incorporating into it any improvements which prove to be feasible and desirable.

At the present time, a major study is in progress to specify the requirements for comprehensive information access in education. This study will generate three new studies this year. First, we shall entertain proposals for the launching of a sensing network intended to provide current data about information requirements and information-using behavior of the educational community. We believe that an information system is usable only to the extent that it is compatible with the needs and styles of its intended clientele. For that reason, we anticipate continuing this type of sensing activity throughout the foreseeable future.

A second study which we plan to support is one to identify the needs for new information files or data bases and the priorities among them. It is clear that neither ERIC nor any other information system provides educators some kinds of information required for educational improvement. Examples of new files which may be needed are educational law, promising or effective school practices, and human resources for technical assistance. The planned study will not only identify the relative need for these and other files, but also provide the preliminary specifications for development and maintenance of the needed files. The results of the study will make it possible for us to begin the design, development, and field testing of new data bases in approximately a year.

The third study to be initiated this year will be a major economic analysis of ERIC. Such an analysis will have implications far beyond ERIC itself, since it will provide us much sounder bases for overall program planning. In addition, of course, it should assist us in more effective allocation of resources within ERIC to maximize its benefits to educators. The study will involve, in addition to the development of an economic data base about ERIC, estimates of the levels of use of ERIC products and services and assessment of the utility of those products and services to the varied segments of the educational community.

So much for our efforts to improve access to knowledge about education. In summary, our plan is to maintain the major information resource now available, ERIC, and undertake a continuing program of improvement and expansion.

Building Capacity for Dissemination and Utilization of Knowledge

Educators are like scholars and practitioners in other fields in the ways they seek and use information. They tend to seek information from the most accessible sources first, and they turn to differing sources for differing information needs. This suggests, therefore, that if we are to facilitate improved use of knowledge, we must have comprehensive and effective information resources close to the end user, and we must provide a variety of different access points for each user.

In attempting to meet these conditions while at the same time working with the existing infrastructure in education, we have set out to improve the capacity of existing organizations and agencies to provide information services to the educational community. In general, our intent is not to support 'one-shot' dissemination projects but to provide support which permits our grantees and contractors to build and institutionalize increased ability in the dissemination area. We are convinced that a monolithic Federal dissemination system is neither desirable nor effective. Instead, we are committed to collaboration with State education agencies, professional associations, institutions of higher education, and other agencies in improving communication and assistance for educators.

Our initial efforts at expanding and improving dissemination capacity have focused upon State education agencies. Our State Agency Dissemination Grants Program is based upon exploratory, pilot efforts begun in the Office of Education some 6 years ago. Over the next decade, we anticipate providing 3-5 years support for each State choosing to participate in the program to build comprehensive and continuing dissemination capacity.

We have begun our efforts with State educational agencies for a number of reasons. First, of course is the constitutional reason: education is a function of the State. Second, the State agency is almost unique in American education in its capacity to exercise leverage: it can reallocate funds, it can influence legislation, and it can regulate. Still a third reason is that by working with State education agencies, it is possible for us to have nationwide impact while dealing with a relatively small number of grantees and with a relatively small budget level. Our current State program began last year with obligation of slightly over $1 million and continues this year at the level of $2 million. For the next fiscal year, we are requesting $3.2 million, with the program topping out at some $5 million in two more years, and thereafter declining.

A State may apply for two different kinds of grants. If the agency is ready to begin building comprehensive capacity, it may apply for a one-year grant which is renewable up to a total of 5 years. The work plan must involve the expansion or improvement of dissemination services to the total educational community of the State during the first year and every year thereafter under the grant. The plan must involve three major components: building and maintaining a comprehensive knowledge resource; providing linkage of the client group to that resource base; and a definable dissemination management component within the State agency.

If a State agency already has a substantial level of dissemination capacity or is not yet prepared to take on a major capacity building effort, it may apply for a somewhat more modest grant for a period of up to one year to complete some single effort which will improve its dissemination posutre. A State already putting significant resources into dissemination may choose to evaluate its current program, or decentralize its information search and retrieval activites, for example. A State which has had

limited dissemination activity may receive support for training staff in dissemination techniques or for developing a comprehensive, long-range dissemination plan, or other "make-ready" efforts.

At the present time, we are providing support for 10 States to carry on longer-range dissemination capacity building activities and for 5 states to complete the shorter, Special Purpose grants. Proposals from 30 States are now being reviewed, and we anticipate initiating 10 or more new Capacity Building grants and approximately 5 new Special Purpose grants during the current fiscal year. Subject to the availability of funds, approximately the same number of States will be able to initiate activities in the fiscal year beginning October 1.

During the current year, we shall initiate a similar program for enhancing the dissemination capacity of professional associations. We are soliciting the advice of associations in designing this new program, since we want to be sure that its final configuration is compatible with the realities of the association world. In future years, we hope that sufficient funds will be available to launch similar capacity building programs institutions of higher education. large school districts, and other educational settings.

All of these capacity building efforts will be subject to independent evaluation. Within the next few weeks, we shall solicit proposals for evualation of our first and second wave of State capacity building grants, and we hope to expand this effort in future years to examine the effects of our other capacity building programs as well. At least during the initial stages, the emphasis will be on formative, rather than summative evaluation, since we are concerned with providing our grantees with evidence of help in improving their activities, we well as informing us of needed modifications in our program plan.

Still another aspect of our efforts to expand dissemination capacity is our intent to build more of a sense of community among various groups engaging in dissemination activities in education. At the present time, we support, under contract, the convening of key State dissemination representatives. At these national meetings, the participants react to NIE plans and programs, suggest new programmatic directions, and share their experiences with new and effective dissemination strategies and techniques. Other, similar meetings are sponsored for users of the ERIC computer tapes, ERIC clearinghouse directors, and technical staff of the ERIC clearinghouses. We hope, in future years to encourage joint meetings among these and other groups, in order that there may be an increasing level of professionalization among the various individuals engaged in dissemination activites.

But all our efforts to improve dissemination capacities in educational organizations and agencies will be relatively unsuccessful unless there is a corresponding skill in actually making use of knowledge in decision-making and problem-solving among teachers, administrators, and other education groups. For that reason, it is our hope in future years to support the improvement of knowledge utilization skills among educators. The first steps will include the development of in-service training designs, but in the longer range, we hope to encourage the inclusion of content on knowledge utilization techniques in pre-service teacher education.

This, then is an overview of one of our two strategies for fostering the use of knowledge for educational improvement. There is already some preliminary evidence that it is having some beneficial effects, but much remains to be done. Perhaps the biggest gap we now perceive is that there is a great deal more need for research and development which will provide us additional insight into dissemination and utilization processes, and improved techniques for knowledge utilization. We have chosen to emphasize expanded service and access to knowledge over knowledge-building efforts in this area, but we recognize the need to build a stronger theoretical and empirical base for tomorrows' dissemination and utilization programs. That is one of our tasks for the future.

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